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Visionaries of the Road

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American Modernism

Vogel

4 December 2018

Visionaries of the Road

The sound of rubber wheels zooming down the highway at 65mph is a familiar sound to most—if not all—Americans. Travel is pivot point of how Americans live, being a necessity to have a feasible way of life. Without automobiles, people have a hard time getting to work, school, and family, which affects the state of living and the ability to advance in the class system to have an easier time in life. Travel is what connects people throughout the large country they live in, yet it is also the source of arguments and debates as gas prices rise and more jobs require further travel with less than substantial pay to cover the cost of that travel. The experiences documented by Ezra Meeker, Horatio Nelson Jackson, and William Least Heat-Moon's trips across the country offer a glimpse into a world where a road trip was not as easy as getting onto the interstate to drive along paved roads for eight hours. These trips were before the comforts of modern travel that are taken advantage of today not only in America, but across the world. Through trips taken by people like Meeker, Nelson Jackson, and Heat-Moon, the path taken to modern automobility is sure to never be forgotten.

Through the journeys that Meeker, Nelson Jackson, and Heat-Moon took, each experienced the concepts of space and landscape differently. Each man's journey across the United States was not only a personal and enlightening experience for him, but by sharing it with the rest of the country he participated in making his view of the vast landscape an artistic

experience as well. John Brinckerhoff Jackson explains the original definition of landscape well in chapter six of his book, “Landscape in Sight”. The dictionary definition describes landscape as a “portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance”, whereas according to Jackson, the original definition of landscape did not refer to “the view itself, it meant a *picture* of [the landscape], an artist’s interpretation” (300). Meanwhile, in Henri Lefebvre’s piece, “Production of Space”, his definition of space continues Jackson’s notion of landscape by defining space as being a “social product” that exists in every society, which itself produces its own space. “The fact is that natural space will soon be lost to view... Nature is also becoming lost to *thought*.” (Lefebvre 31)

It is thought that drives people forward to do things that others do not think to do, as with Meeker and Heat-Moon, or that others think are impossible, like with Nelson Jackson. Thought leads to discovery, and discovery brings about new space that has yet to be explored; from there, it is the artistic license of each explorer that allows him to take the space he has discovered, look to the rest of the world, and invite them into the space with him. It allows him to share his troubles, his discoveries, and his experiences, and lets him open a dialogue to the public that says *anyone* could do this, if he or she took the leap and gave it a try. If Meeker had not taken a leap at 77 years old, the Oregon Trail would be lost to the ages; if Nelson Jackson had not taken a dare, he never would have shown the country that driving cross-country is possible; if Heat-Moon had not lost his job, he never would have traveled to and written about the lost small towns that litter the country. How is it, then, that each one of these three men were able to share their space with the rest of the country, and what impact did their travels inflict on how the population of the United States view travel?

Perhaps the best place to start with Ezra Meeker's journey would be at the beginning, when he first took to the Oregon Trail. Taking the trail could be an excruciating journey for many families, causing illness and death among wagon parties before they could reach the West coast. Meeker first traveled the trail when he was young, his son a month old and his health at its prime. It was later in his life that he took the trail four more times, and it was later in life that Meeker recalled his trip in his book, *Ox-Teams on the Oregon Trail* in 1922. Meeker's travel party had a train of four wagons, each person in the wagon train carrying skills that helped them all along the trail and collaborating with one another until they came to a point where they would have to part ways to reach their own destination. After reaching Portland, Oregon on October 1, 1852, Meeker stayed on the west coast for 54 years before determining that he would head out back on the trail.

It was his trip from Puyallup, Washington, to Washington, D.C., that began Meeker's formation—or rather, his reformation—of space. The Oregon Trail had been a space that he shared with many pioneers in its heyday, but as the years passed since the final pioneer ended the trail, that space was becoming less and less relevant and slowly forgotten to the past. For Meeker, the idea of the trail being forgotten was unfathomable. "I longed to go back over the old Oregon Trail and mark it for all time for the children of the pioneers who blazed it," he had said. "and for the world." (162) So started his preparations to take to the trail once again in 1905, leaving Puyallup on January 29, 1906 to erect monuments that would commemorate those who passed while trying to emigrate to Oregon and those who had completed the trail and passed later in life. He decided to travel the trail like he had over fifty years prior: a wagon and a yoke of oxen to pull him along. He was encouraged by the support shown from the start as he set monuments in Tenino, Chehalis, Toledo, and Portland, and was even the one to deliver

dedication speeches at town-wide ceremonies for the event. Meeker even had the pleasure of discovering ruts worn into the Rocky Mountains from the pioneers who had traveled that path half a century prior. From monument to monument, Meeker drew in the folks that lived in the towns built on or around the old trail and earned their participation in recounting the history that brought them from where they could have been on the east coast to where they currently lived on the west coast. Traveling in the wagon like he did only served to bring more publicity to both him and his expedition, some towns even gathering ahead of time with ideas of where they would like to place their monument. When he finally reached Washington, D.C., he convinced a Congress committee to consider a bill to provide \$50,000 toward marking the trail, though Meeker did not fully consider his work done until he was on his way back home. “Words cannot express my deep feeling of gratitude for the royal welcome given me by the citizens of Portland,” he said. “I was privileged to attend the reunion of the two thousand pioneers who had just assembled for their annual meeting... On the eighteenth day of July, 1908, I drove into the city of Seattle and the long journey was ended. My dreams of retracing the way over the Old Trail had come true.” (225)

While Meeker crossed the country to preserve the trail that ended up being an important and sizable part of his life, it is not necessary to have a goal in mind while traveling. Modern travel can happen for school or work, but there is also the freedom of being able to simply hop into a car and go where the road may lead. Roads today, of course, did not exist over a century ago, yet that did not stop Horatio Nelson Jackson from getting into a car, fondly named *the Vermont* after his home state, and driving across terrains the car was not made for simply because he was able to. He took the trip upon himself because of a discussion had with a group of men in the University Club of San Francisco. There had been disagreement between the men

as to whether an ocean-to-ocean trip would be feasible, to which Jackson had entertained that it could be, given the right vehicle. According to *The Auto Era*'s 1903 article, "Ocean to Ocean in a Winton", Nelson Jackson had sought out future travel companion Sewall Croker soon after, who had agreed the trip was feasible. "We can do it successfully with a 20-horsepower Winton Touring Car," Croker reportedly said, and Jackson bought the model pre-owned that same day.

How does taking on a challenge create a new space that can eventually be shared with the rest of the country? Surprisingly, it can easily be created through the drive itself. When Nelson Jackson took to the road, he and Croker became the pioneers of cross country travel in a motored vehicle. Before their trip, the vehicles that crossed the country had been wagons pulled by oxen like Meeker had done. The terrains in the middle and the west of the United States were not paved for a car to travel on smoothly, shown throughout the letter Nelson Jackson wrote to *Auto Era* as he spoke of how *the Vermont* lost ball bearings, broke stud bolts, and ran poorly due to the lack of lubricating oil that they had to replace with axle grease. "It was a crime the way in which we were often forced to abuse that motor," Nelson Jackson had said. "The wonder is that any automobile could successfully master the difficulties we forced our Winton into." ("Ocean to Ocean" 10) Of course, that is not to say that trips of this nature were never attempted before—especially along the desert terrain—but, according to *Auto Era*, the trip that Nelson Jackson and Croker took in their Winton was the first successful trip.

The space that Nelson Jackson and Croker opened allowed people to think that travel across country in something faster than a wagon was possible, and by 1919 the first cross country highway was built: the Lincoln Highway. The U.S. Army sent a convoy across the highway to San Francisco to show the achievement to the country. As furthermore portrayed by Marguerite S. Shaffer, the production of cross country roads opened the tourism industry and

allowed Americans to participate in their own journeys to discover not only themselves, but their country as well: “Merritt recounts his tour as a kind of voyage of American discovery, implicitly and explicitly linking his experience with the larger search for cultural and national identity.”

(Shaffer 2)

Though a different sort of travel experience compared to Meeker and Nelson Jackson, William Least Heat-Moon’s trip across the United States to the small towns that just barely earn a place on the map is not any less important. As shown in Heat-Moon’s book, *Blue Highways*, some of the best life lessons and self-discovery can come from taking the time to both take roads less traveled and talk to the locals to hear their stories. That is exactly what Heat-Moon did after he lost his job. He took a few essentials, got into his car, and drove off to explore:

After that, the 42,000 miles of straight and wide could lead to hell for all I cared; I was going to stay on the three million miles of bent and narrow rural American two-lane, the roads to Podunk and Toonerville. Into the sticks, the boon-docks, the burgs, backwaters, jerkwaters, the wide-spots-in-the-road, the don’t-blink-or-you’ll-miss-it towns. Into those places where you say, ‘My god! What if you lived here!’ The Middle of Nowhere. (16)

Heat-Moon went out and purposefully found the “blue highway” that would take him through these towns, spending days in each and learning about the locals. He helped a man named Bob Andriot renovate a two-story house that had a log cabin underneath the siding so Andriot could turn it into an interior design shop. He sat with a couple in Shelbyville for supper who told him the difference between a job and work: “A job’s what you force yourself to pay attention to for money. With work, you don’t have to force yourself” (21). He asked Rosemary and Bill Hammond in Kentucky learned about the area that surrounded the couple as well as the boat that they were slowly building up river—a boat that represented “a seventy-seven-thousand-pound

dream... a way of life” (38) for the couple. Even when he was not sure why he was taking his trip in the first place (“I might as well admit that the next morning in smoky Morristown I was asking myself what in damnation I thought I was doing” (58)). As he traveled, Heat-Moon became the definition of curiosity, or to be carefully observant. While writing his book, he addressed the concept of creating new space perhaps without realizing it himself by saying, “Do new *things* make for new ways of seeing?” (32) Through being an active observer, Heat-Moon was able to collect details enough to publish and show the country the small towns that are just as important to what America is as the cities that draw in the tourists and immigrants that Shaffer mentioned in “See America First”.

Meeker’s space opened the country to forgotten history. Nelson Jackson’s space opened the country to transcontinental travel. Heat-Moon’s space opened the country to curiosity and knowledge. Each of these three men, through their own autobiographies or letters, opened their discoveries to the country the moment they decided to share their stories with everyone. Whether their stories led continental change or simple self-discovery and encouragement, their narratives allowed Americans the *choice* to take their lives into their own hands and stay connected with one another in whatever form they saw fit. Their spaces encouraged connection to one another, because without someone willing to take a leap into the unknown, no one would advance into a brighter and better future.

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